Cambridgeshire County Council

learning together

Spring 2009 **Issue 23**

featuring:

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a termly magazine for school staff & governors

www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/learningtogether

Dear readers...

As many of you will know, I am holding the fort as **Acting Deputy Chief Executive** until **1 April** whilst **Gordon Jeyes** is temporarily covering the post of **Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate Services**.

No doubt you will also have heard about changes in our management structure. From April Gordon's post will be retitled Executive Director: Children and Young People's Services and reporting to him will be four Service Directors – Strategy and Commissioning (myself), Learning (Helen Whiter), Children's Social Care (Niki Clemo) and Children's Enhanced and Preventative Services (Charlotte Black). Mike Davey has taken up the post of Service Director, Community Engagement (Fenland) which forms part of Community and Adult Services. We will also be known from April as Children and Young People's Services, the "Office" having been dropped.

The main change here is that we no longer have the three Area Director posts. The new roles for Niki and Charlotte will ensure clear strategic countywide accountability for the key areas of social care and enhanced and preventative services, the latter including the Locality Teams.

At the time of writing we are consulting on proposed further changes within the organisation, particularly within Niki and Charlotte's areas. The remit and management of the Learning Directorate will not change.

Turning to this issue of Learning Together, our theme is Parental Engagement. As you will see, we have been able to feature many examples of how schools have approached this key area. What strikes me is the sheer variety of these approaches with, in many cases, great invention and imagination being shown by schools to achieve genuine involvement by parents and carers. The main purpose of Learning Together is to share good practice and I have little doubt that you will find what other schools are doing to be at the very least interesting but also, I hope, inspiring.

The theme for the Summer Term issue will be Sustainability so please let the Editor know if anything you are doing in that arena which you think might be of interest to colleagues.

Adrian Loades

Acknowledgements

Articles, letters and pictures

We are keen to receive all contributions. Please send them to Paul Ainsworth, Room B106, Box SS1003, Castle Court, Shire Hall, Cambridge CB3 0AP or email: **paul.ainsworth@cambridgeshire.gov.uk**

Notes for Contributors

Ideally contributions should not exceed 500 words and much smaller contributions and news items are also welcome. Please include photographs with parental permission to print when possible. We have produced a guidance note for contributors. For a copy please phone Sonia Fresco on 01223 699221 or email: **sonia.fresco@cambridgeshire.gov.uk**

The deadline date for the next edition of **Learning Together** is **8 May 2009**.

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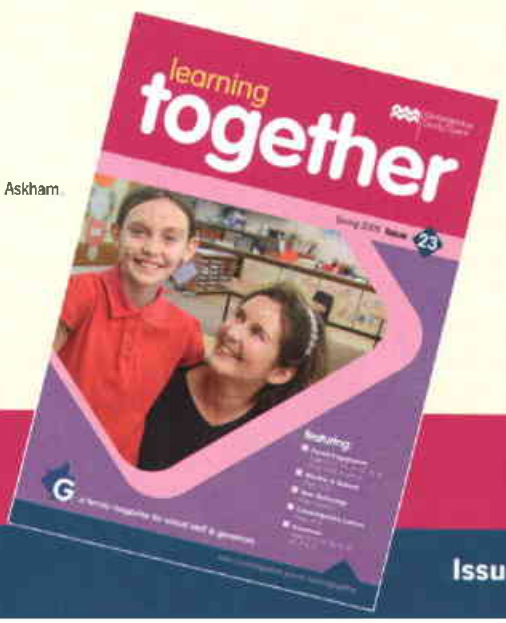

Cover picture: Parent and child interaction – in action!

look out for...
our special Governors' articles wherever you see this logo!

Achieving together

Siobhan Rouse, Headteacher of St Philip's Primary School Cambridge reports on successful efforts to enhance family learning opportunities at the school.

One of our priorities at St Philip's has been to increase parental involvement and help parents to effectively support their children's learning. For a number of years we have been involved in Family Learning week in October, and have held very successful events on a Saturday morning. We have welcomed more than 150 parents and children each time to a series of workshops at the school. Most of the activities (cookery, messy play, story telling, technology challenges, ICT sessions, art classes) are run by school staff, but we have used grants to buy in specialists to offer workshops in Samba or circus skills. The aim is that parents and children should have fun and learn new skills together; the format seemed very successful, and it allowed us to reach a cross-section of the school community, including some of our black and minority ethnic families.

Last year we built on this idea by running further family learning events during the year. In November we held a Reading for Life event immediately after school. As well as a visit from Gillian McClure, a local author and illustrator, we had: a stand from the Cambridgeshire Library service; a family reading quiz; a "chill zone" for parents and children to share books together; a puppet-making workshop; and other fun activities to promote reading at home.

In February, as part of our annual Maths Week, we held a family maths event. The ENRICH road show had been working in school during the day, and agreed to stay on to hold a family session. The children were very eager to get their parents to try the challenges in the hall. In classrooms we had: maths games and thinking skills puzzles; websites to support learning tables and number bonds; soup-making using vegetables from the school allotment; and sessions to explain the approaches to teaching calculation used in school.

Throughout the year we have been working with the Family Learning service to provide training for parents. We have hosted literacy, numeracy, child development and ICT courses, and we have been really encouraged to see parents passing their exams and gaining qualifications. Providing a crèche in school (funded by Family Learning) has made the courses accessible to all parents, and although numbers have been small (6-8 for each course), it has had a real impact for those individuals.

We have continued to hold more traditional workshops for parents on Helping with Phonics, Hearing your Child Read and Understanding Maths (a Key Stage 1 and a Key Stage 2 session). Also, every Spring Term, we have a Literacy workshop that specifically targets families for whom English is an additional language. These sessions usually last about 40 minutes and are run by school staff. They are held from 9.00- 10.00 or 2.30- 3.20 to fit in with the school day. Although we send details to all parents, we have found that personal invitations from staff are particularly effective, as are a few key parent advocates on the playground. We encourage parents of children in the Foundation Stage to attend a series of workshops on early literacy and numeracy skills with the emphasis being on the partnership between school and home. One of our parent governors provides homemade cakes for our workshops, which is another incentive to attend.

The feedback from parents has been very positive. Following a recent Key Stage 2 maths workshop comments included:

"Good to finally know the 'proper' way to teach and re-inforce maths methods with the kids at home."

"Really did help me understand the different methods my daughter uses."

"Use of number lines and beads useful to see how this is taught in class."

Our school motto, developed following input from parents, pupils, staff and governors is "Achieving together" and we believe that the excitement generated by family learning is having a real impact at St Philip's.

Family learning opportunities at St Philip's Primary School.

Consulting parents – a new approach

Parents Evenings are a long established means of engaging with parents but are they especially effective and do some parents find them daunting? The Parkside Federation in Cambridge has been looking into an alternative approach and the editor met **John Jones**, Deputy Principal, to find out how this was working at the Coleridge Campus.

John explained that the new system of "parent surgeries" (the name is under review) began in September 2008. One driver had been concerns that the traditional parent consultation evenings were providing parents with fairly low-level engagement with teaching staff (and involved much waiting around). Some parents never turned up which suggested they found the format off-putting. Also, the increasing popularity of the school has seen many more students joining during the term (over 40 since September), in some cases after the parent evening had taken place.

All teachers and teaching assistants now have roles as Learning Mentors. Each tutor group (of no more than 30 students) has two Mentors. One lesson per week is devoted to the Mentor role which means that Mentors have the opportunity of a formal one-to-one with each of their students six times a year. This system is working well and provided another stimulus for changes to the parent consultation process.

The end result is that the Federation now operates Parents and Students Surgeries each Wednesday between 8.30am and 9.30am. These offer parents the ability to talk to subject teachers and Mentors about their child's progress. Parents can make a 15 minute appointment by contacting the school (by phone or email) by the Friday of the preceding week. Parents are asked to indicate any particular issues they want to discuss so that the right person (subject teacher or Mentor) will be there and they will have been able to prepare in advance. If parents are unable to visit the school then contact can take place over the phone.

The logistics of all this are managed by the school's very efficient office staff who use software called "Practice Net" to assist them with the complex scheduling.

Obviously it's still fairly early days yet but the signs are positive. Coupled with the Federation's well-established Personal Learning Planning Day, over 95% of families have been in to meet teachers in the first term and a half. Mentors have recently been asked to be proactive in making contact with parents of "their" students and encouraging them to attend which should push up participation rates even higher. There will be a formal evaluation in the summer term when views of teaching staff, parents and students will all be gathered and analysed. However, anecdotal evidence is that the new system is popular with most concerned. Because the approach is much more focused and personalised than the formal parents' evening, it has been easier to persuade those parents who never attended evenings for whatever reason to come along. Also, because the school is "working" at this time of day, parents can get a much better feel for the school as it really is which consequently enhances the school's efforts to be seen as a part of the community and a place which welcomes parents in.

John was keen to stress that the Surgeries are at least as much about positives as tackling problems. Teachers and Mentors will always highlight student achievements and give praise where it's due as well as raise issues which need to be addressed. The hope is that the parent reaction on being contacted won't automatically be "what's he/she done now?"

Some parents have mentioned that early mornings just aren't personally convenient for them and this will be looked at as part of the evaluation. In the meantime, however, teachers and mentors are always willing to contact parents in the evening if need be.

Finally John pointed out that the Surgeries are just a part of the Federation's commitment to enhancing parental engagement. Other examples include the Home Learning Scheme which gives parents more information about what their children are learning and enables them to get involved. The Federation also offers various parent support activities including workshops and courses.

The Autumn Term Learning Together will feature a follow-up article reporting on the surgery evaluation outcomes.

Digital literacy at Sawtry

Several of the articles about parental engagement in this issue have highlighted the role which new technology can play in enhancing involvement. An especially exciting development in this arena is the Microsoft IT Academy at Sawtry Community College and the editor found out more from Associate Principal **Alan Stephens**.

The Microsoft Partners in Learning scheme enables schools to take advantage of cutting edge new technology software – Microsoft themselves then get valuable feedback from the school experience of using these applications. Alan told me that at Sawtry, the Academy provides services for students, school staff, other local schools, businesses and the wider community. I was especially interested in the support offered to the school's own parents so Alan explained how the Digital Literacy (DL) curriculum has been operating.

The classes, which are free, take place on two mornings and one evening each week.

The curriculum comprises five online courses

- computer basics
- the internet and world wide web
- productivity programmes (like word processing)
- computer security and privacy
- digital lifestyles (e.g. photos and music)

Each course has an e-learning module and an assessment. Students can take a Certificate Test covering topics from all five courses and gain a Digital Literacy Certificate if they pass. Students also have the option of taking the online exam for the OCR Entry Level Certificate in Digital Literacy – six students took this exam last term.

Alan feels that the main value of the course is in giving people with little or no IT experience the confidence to learn on-line and acquire skills which ensure that they don't feel "left out" of the digital age. In particular it enables parents to keep up with their kids. The College places increased focus on family learning and ensuring that as many parents as possible have a grasp of on-line learning means they are more able to support their children with the work tackled at home on their computers. Additionally, email and the College website are increasingly important means of communicating with parents so the more of them who are comfortable using these media the better.

Alan then took me to visit the Academy accommodation which can be seen in the accompanying photograph.

It is clearly a very well resourced facility. The Academy also works closely with local businesses, through the Chamber of Commerce as well as with teaching staff from other schools, trainee teachers and the school's own sixth formers. There is close working with the adjoining library, through which there has been access to lottery funding for various community projects such as villages putting their archives on-line. All of this helped the college achieve the Future Vision award last year for extended services and community engagement.

Looking ahead, Alan expects on-line assessment and reporting to be available soon, meaning that parents will be able to check their child's progress at any time rather than waiting for the traditional parents' evening. The latter will be replaced by appointments with teachers at the most appropriate time for each child and parent.

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Further information

You can find out more about the DL programme at www.microsoft.com/dlc.

web

"Teaching and Learning Together" in action

Spinney Primary School, Cherry Hinton, Cambridge achieved "Outstanding" in its recent Ofsted inspection with parent participation and family learning both highlighted as strong features in the school. The Editor met Headteacher **Rachel Snape** and Family Learning Coordinator **Lucy Smith** to find the secrets of their success.

Rachel explained that when she arrived at the school two years ago she was particularly drawn to the school's mission statement "Teaching and Learning Together" and was keen to realise the school's ambitious aim for everyone in the school community, pupils, staff, parents and friends of the school. Rachel identified the opportunity to promote family engagement in learning as a priority and a range of initiatives and ventures have taken place in the last couple of years. In September 2007 Lucy Smith was appointed and as a Fast Track teacher she took on family learning as her whole school development project, with Family Learning Coordinator being one of her roles in the school.

Rachel and Lucy first took me through the Family Learning Week held last October. This was launched on the Sunday with an "It's a Knock Out" family competition, for which local businesses donated prizes. The next five days featured two or three events which parents could join in with. These included Time Out Techniques (relaxation and massage), making natural face masks, technology at your finger tips and playing rounders. The most popular event was "Stay and Play", with two one-hour sessions on the Monday. Parents and carers engaged in craft activities with their children and made something together; a free crèche and refreshments encouraged attendance.

Outdoor fun and games.

Participation

Learning can be fun!

The week was a great success with over 100 families (275 people) taking part. Parents completed evaluation forms and the very positive feedback included the following quotes:

"Great fun and lovely to take part in what is an important part of my daughter's life".

"Wonderfully satisfying session using all sorts of different equipment".

"Thank you for helping me learn new things".

"Great quality time away from home".

The Stay and Play events are so popular that they are now held termly.

The school is also working with the Family Learning team at Shire Hall to promote Adult Education courses at the school, with displays in the front entrance and provision of a crèche for sessions held at the school.

A literacy-based "Keeping Up with the Children" course is currently being run which teaches parents new skills and helps them to support their children by explaining the school's approaches for teaching phonics, reading, and handwriting. The next course for parents will be "Developing Children's Language and Communication Skills in Child Care" which can lead to an OCN qualification if parents wish. The school also runs other courses such as 1, 2, 3, Magic to support families with positive behaviour management and promotes other national initiatives such as adult literacy and mathematics, including Gremlins and Next Steps.

Lucy has recently contacted the other schools in Cherry Hinton to explore the possibilities for collaborative projects to promote parental engagement and perhaps some shared community events.

Rachel says "We are keen to see our pupils do well and there is plenty of evidence nationally that children whose parents play an active part in their children's education perform better, and this is one of the reasons the Spinney puts such a positive emphasis on promoting family learning and parental engagement."

Lucy adds "The key to success is making sure that families feel welcomed in the school and respected as partners in learning. We try to offer a variety of learning opportunities in a relaxed environment that appeal to as many families as possible, we also aim to ensure that both adults and children leave a family learning event with a sense of achievement and a shared experience of "Teaching and Learning Together".

The high percentage of take-up by parents and the positive feedback from them suggests they are very much succeeding.

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Further information

Find out more at **http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/article.aspa?PageId=1320**

web

The joy of nurture

Deborah Hanniford, Headteacher of **Ramsey Community Junior School**, writes about their Nurture Group and its impact on the whole school and on parental engagement.

Four years ago when I started my headship here, I soon realised that considerable work was needed to raise standards, improve the quality of learning and teaching and put in place an agreed whole school approach to managing behaviour. Two years in, the quality of learning and teaching was steadily improving, standards were rising and the incidence of low level 'irritating' behaviour was significantly reduced. We were then in a position to notice those 'hard to reach' children for whom this was not enough. Some of these children were very disruptive and at real risk of permanent exclusion; others were very quiet and withdrawn. All had complex issues going on in their lives e.g. domestic violence, involvement of Children's Mental Health services and/or Social Care.

To reach these children I decided to set up a Nurture Group. A true nurture group, which is what we have, requires staff to be trained and gain accreditation following a course based on nurture group principles as set up and developed by Eve Boyd and Marion Boxall. It is not an inclusion group to 'hold' children to avoid permanent exclusion. Its purpose is to meet the needs of children who have significant and challenging social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and to develop their social and emotional skills so that they are then able to return successfully to their mainstream classes full time, relatively unsupported. The children may also have some learning difficulties, but not necessarily, but they will certainly be underachieving. Children with statements do not join our group as we believe the issuing of a statement makes provision for their needs in the mainstream class. Initially the children are identified by their class teacher and teaching assistant; the Nurture Group staff then carry out a series of observations and complete a Boxall Profile with the class teacher – this identifies areas of strength and weakness in social and emotional development. Careful consideration has to be given to the boy-girl ratio and the balance of personality types.

Our Nurture Group, named the Rainbow Group by the first group of children who joined it, operates all morning every morning, for up to 10 children at any one time; children can be in the group for up to 4 terms. It is run by a qualified teacher and a Level 3 TA, both of whom have completed the training. The children register with their 'mainstream' class in the morning and are then collected by the Rainbow Group staff at around 9am. Their morning is highly structured, although on first impression it may not look like it! Around 20mins is spent on basic literacy skills such as spelling, reading and handwriting. Breakfast takes place from around 9:30am for at least half an hour. Sitting around a table, learning table manners, sharing 'news' (when your mouth is empty!), listening to others, helping to wash up, taking turns...the power of breakfast in terms of learning skills cannot be underestimated! The remainder of the morning revolves around developing social skills, literacy and numeracy through structured play. The children make lots of visits eg to Hinchingbooke Park – to learn how to take risks and perhaps fail initially, help and support each other, have fun and provide a stimulus for other work.

So in our second year of having a Nurture Group, is it successful? A resounding 'YES'! The financial costs have been considerable but, I believe, worth it. Four children have successfully returned to their classes. Children in school say things like 'he/she's so much kinder now...they don't get so angry...when he/she was in our class all the time at the beginning they stopped us from learning, now they don't....' Parents of children in the group feel supported and often relieved that 'at last somebody's noticed that my child's different'. Some of these parents are having or have had traumatic experiences in their own lives. With time and sensitive relationships developed with staff in the Rainbow Group hopefully they feel they are beginning to develop a network of support. There are times when I feel as though the group has become a 'drop-in centre' for parents at the beginning and end of the day...coming for tea and biscuits on a Friday afternoon...coming in for a chat because the weekend didn't go well...but actually, in terms of understanding the complex lives of our children, in trying to develop their self-esteem and give them strategies for life, I feel proud that we have developed not only this special group for our children, but also a 'sanctuary' perhaps, to enable some of our parents to move forward.

The **Parent Partnership Service**

The **Parent Partnership Service** (PPS) is a service for parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs. It promotes positive outcomes for children and young people through partnerships between parents, schools, local authority officers and other agencies.

Nationally Parent Partnership Services have been working with parents and carers of children with special educational needs since the 1990s and in some local authorities even earlier. The government recognised that parents and carers of children with special educational needs often felt ill informed and unable to contribute to the decisions being made about their child's education. PPS were set up as arms length services to offer impartial advice and support to address that concern. We work with parents of children and young people from pre school to 19 years.

A substantial amount of our work is case work. Parents can self refer to us, there is a Confidential Advice Line Link (CALL), 01223 699214, and an email address **pps@cambridgeshire.gov.uk**. We offer advice and support over the phone and PPS Area case co-ordinators are able to attend meetings with parents to support them.

Providing impartial information is a key part of the role. We have 13 leaflets on various aspects of SEN available to parents. We produce termly newsletter for both parents and practitioners containing details of courses being run as well as information on government and local authority initiatives that will affect parents of children with SEN. We have a website which had over 14,000 hits last year either via the council's website or the education portal. Last year an updated version of the PPS help file for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) was distributed to all Cambridgeshire education settings.

Wherever possible the training we offer is for both parents and professionals. The termly Road Show currently has seminars on:

- Primary to Secondary Transfer
- Special Educational Needs Code of Practice
- Siblings
- Dealing with conflict and talking to children (0-10)

A Makaton course and Conciliation Skills course for parents will be available next term.

As an organisation we have always recognised the benefits of parent groups both in terms of the support they can offer to parents but also the part they can play in influencing local authority policy and practice. We help parents to set up groups as well as supporting existing ones. Our Parent Groups Pack, free to all parent led groups, has advice on setting up a parent group, running one, fund raising, setting up a committee etc. There is also a register of parent groups so that parents can easily be referred to groups in their locality. The 'Parent and Carers Consultation Task Group (PaCT)', is a voluntary consultation data-base that enables us to consult parents on specific issues related to special educational needs and share their views and opinions with the Council or other agreed agencies about a range of issues.

Part of our work is to influence local authority practice by feeding back the information received from parents and groups that are in contact with us. The PPS is represented on local authority strategy groups including the Every Disabled Child Matters Strategy Group and the Anti Bullying Strategy Group and has been proactively involved in the development of the Parental Support and Involvement Strategy. We work in partnership with a range of voluntary and community groups including the three area hub groups for parents, Contact a Family and pinpoint.

info

Further information

Please contact Sharon Camilletti on 01223 699211 or email sharon.camilletti@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Win-Win in Outwell

Although I try to avoid using clichés and well-worn phrases (writes the editor), "win/win situation" came to mind so often on my recent visit to **Beaupré Primary School, Outwell**.

Headteacher **Lesley Johnson** had invited me along to find out about the learning courses which the school offers to parents. Also present were five of those parents and **Sue Young**, County Organiser of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) who run one of the courses.

Lesley strongly believes that good home/school relations are vital for children to make optimum progress. It's a fact, though, that for some parents, their own education and the time they spent at primary or secondary school was not a positive experience and this can erect an immediate obstacle for them. Also the very necessary measures which schools now must put in place around child protection and security can be perceived as a shutting-out. The reality of course is that Beaupré, like other schools, very much wants to encourage parents to gain a better understanding of how it works and to get more involved. Offering courses through Family Learning and the WEA has greatly helped in breaking down barriers but has also generated extra resources for the school.

The Family Learning courses have been great for enabling parents to keep up with their kids in Maths and English. This term the aim is to offer a phonics-based course which will allow parents, along with a Teaching Assistant, to work with their own child. The WEA Helping in Schools course is more about the learner's own development, teaching them new skills which can help put them on a career path if they want. There were ten participants on the recent course at Beaupré, seven from the school catchment area and three from neighbours.

Sue explained that the Helping in Schools course, which is provided free of charge, is for voluntary classroom helpers. It represents a significant commitment by participants, being 45 hours long (10 whole day sessions) plus a 20 hour (two hours per week) classroom placement. There is also homework; you have to compile a portfolio comprising a weekly diary, discovery exercises and a project on an educational issue of your choice. On completing the course you get a Level 1, 2 or 3 Open College Network Certificate, recognised throughout the UK. It can lead to further childcare training and, potentially, paid employment. Sue's experience is that the course has given many people the confidence to broaden their horizons and perhaps go further than they had ever dreamed. The fact that the course is free obviously removes one obstacle; at Beaupré, provision of a crèche removes another.

Sue is grateful to Headteachers like Lesley who have committed to the course, finding accommodation and providing backing for attenders. Sue will have moved to pastures new by the time you read this and both the local authority and many schools are very grateful for her efforts in getting the course established.

The next course at Beaupré starts on 24 April.

I then heard from five parents who had taken advantage of the course offer.

Kerry, whose son is disabled, had been very impressed by the "brilliant" Teaching Assistant who worked with him and felt she would like to have such a rewarding career – so the course was a first step. She says it has also changed her perception of the school; she's someone who didn't like it in her own day but now sees how much things have changed for the better.

Kathy had found herself in a bit of a limbo following her son's birth but knew she wanted to return to work when he was old enough to go to school. She had friends who are TAs and who clearly enjoyed their work; the course was a means to find out whether classroom work might suit her. The answer was a definite yes and she's now keen to train as a TA.

Ann's family relocated to the area from Norwich so getting involved with the school, which her daughter attends, was a way to meet people. She found Beaupré very welcoming and, having got a taste of classroom working, was keen to explore the possibilities which the course seemed to offer. She found the course to be great, confirming that working with children is what she wants to do. She's now gone on to an NVQ evening course and to helping with the Under 5s centre attached to the school. She has also made loads of friends!

Dawn had taken on a Parent Governor role at the school which made her want to find out more about how it worked – something which the course enabled her to do. Again, it fired

up her enthusiasm and she has enrolled on a NVQ level 2 course, intending to go on to level 3. She is also now working 19 hours a week in the school and really enjoying it.

Kirsty has also used the course as a springboard to employment. She has worked as a Teaching Assistant at the school for the last two and a half years, having been on one of the first Family Learning courses. She had previously worked in Adult Social Care and has found that many of those skills have transferred well to her new job.

In summary, all the parents had not just enjoyed the course but found it invaluable in clarifying their future career paths. From the school's point of view, they have been able to recruit both well-trained volunteers and permanent staff. What has been especially enriching for the school is the variety of backgrounds and experiences which the parents bring with them. This in turn enables the wide range of children's needs to be better addressed. The active engagement of these parents also gives a positive message to other parents about the attitude of the school as well as offering role models.

Lesley sees the parents who have been through the course as ambassadors for the school; they know how the school works and how children can best be helped to progress, they have the confidence that goes with that knowledge and they easily have the ear of other parents because they share the same backgrounds. The time and effort which the school puts in to helping run the courses is more than repaid by the contributions which the parents make as a result. For the parents themselves, the training is both enjoyable and practically valuable. As I said, win-win all round.

Extending the learning habit at Monkfield

The Learning Together Editorial Board felt that an interesting angle on parental engagement would be to look at how a new school in a new community had tackled it. The Editor arranged to visit Monkfield Park Primary School in what he still thinks of as the spanking new settlement of Cambourne. However, time gallops on and he was startled to find that the school is already 10 years old! Luckily, he soon discovered that the visit was very worthwhile as Headteacher Lynne Anderson and Deputy Head Caroline Stamp-Dod were able to describe a variety of interesting parental engagement initiatives.

The first of these involved parental contributions to the development of the school's disability equality scheme. A questionnaire was first circulated to parents/carers, inviting comments and interest, and this generated an encouraging level of response – both from parents with a disabled child of their own and from folk with experience of working in the disability arena. A group of staff, governors and parents/carers was then established and they came up with recommendations for enhancing provision around disability issues e.g. improvements to car parking arrangements and developing appropriate information sharing with parents/carers.

On the same theme, the school organised one of its regular Curriculum Evenings with a focus on disability and discrimination. This offered parents/carers a carousel of workshops to visit, on autism, dyslexia-friendly classrooms and the anti-bullying strategy.

Other Curriculum Evenings have covered numeracy, foreign languages and phonics. The numeracy element was so popular that an event was held devoted purely to this subject. The emphasis was on enabling adults to experience what maths lessons are actually like nowadays. The evening was over-subscribed and feedback very positive with parents/carers asking for more.

The evenings start at 6pm and attract parents/carers of both genders. Anyone unable to attend can access the information on the school's website (or request a hard copy if they don't have web access).

A spin-off from the enthusiastic response to the numeracy evening has been a series of family learning workshops on numeracy. 10 sessions have been held; providing a crèche at the Nursery School next door removed one of the potential obstacles to attendance. The workshops took attendees through how numeracy is taught nowadays in schools. This enables parents/carers to give their children more help with their work whilst, for some, it also improves their numeracy skills.

Lynne and **Caroline** emphasised that these initiatives all stemmed primarily from what parents/carers themselves had said would be useful to them in helping them help their children improve their performance. The investment of time and money has been most worthwhile as everyone concerned has clearly derived tangible benefits from it.

Going batty (and birdy) in Stapleford

Claire Turner, Headteacher of **Stapleford Community Primary School**, describes how a recent family workshop helped the school meet two aims in a single event.

Children being shown how to build a bird box.

We had just renovated our ancient Moat as a wildlife area and a member of the Moat working group suggested that we hold a workshop at school to build bird and bat boxes to encourage wildlife. Inviting parents to work on these with their children allowed us to offer a family learning experience at the same time.

We were fortunate enough to secure a grant from the Cambridge Water Village Life Fund so we would offer the workshop free of charge. John Gibbs, a ranger from the Wandlebury Country Park and Nature Reserve, agreed to run it for only the cost of the materials. All that was needed in addition was the school hall one Saturday morning, a few refreshments and lots of enthusiasm from the families attending.

The workshop was organised into four one hour sessions and families booked a place at the time most convenient for them. At the beginning of each session, John showed the families the three different kinds of box they could build – a bat box, a blue tit box with a small round entrance hole, or a robin-and-wren box with a large opening – and demonstrated how to construct the box. He had already cut all the pieces of wood and provided the drills, hammers, nails and other materials required.

Then it was over to the families, who collected their kits and returned to their tables with differing levels of trepidation. For some parents, it was the first time they had ever made anything out of wood so their children encouraged them, saying, "Come on, we've got to do the drilling now!" Others were very confident and showed their children the correct way to hold the tools, passing on their knowledge as countless generations of parents have in the past. The children took an active and enthusiastic role, marking out the wood, drilling holes and energetically hammering the nails. The best bit for them was drawing pictures of birds and bats onto the boxes once they were finished, and writing little messages welcoming them to their new homes!

Everyone learnt something new about the wildlife as well: the bat boxes were made of rough wood because the bats cling onto it with their sharp claws and crawl up inside the box. The blue tit boxes must have their lids fastened down to stop squirrels from opening them to steal the eggs. The wren boxes should be located low down and surrounded by vegetation to make them attractive to the wrens.

At the end of the morning, we had 18 new boxes to go in our Moat area. The children had enjoyed working with real tools and real materials and some parents had particularly appreciated the opportunity to engage with school activities with their children at a time which fitted in with busy working lives. Now we are all looking forward to seeing what moves into the new boxes during the next spring!

Cambridge Family Mediation

2009 will be a new beginning for many of us, new school year, opportunity to think of new year's resolutions, a time for reflection and a time to look forward. For many children and parents 2009 will be a year of change due to family breakdown. This may mean a change of house, school, friendships and possibly loss of family members through separation. This experience may be very difficult for families to manage and the stability of school and staff may be very helpful.

Almost half of all marriages in England and Wales will end in divorce if current trends continue (Office for National Statistics). Our service supports children and families through our Office and Outreach Work.

Cambridge Family Mediation celebrated its 26th anniversary in 2008. It provides mediation to help those separating /divorcing make arrangements for their children, divide their assets and adjust to family change. The counselling service provides support for parents and children at any stage following separation. This may be helpful immediately following separation, at birth of half sibling or at the introduction of new step family/parent.

In the last two years we have been developing a consultancy and training service for schools to support children, young people and their parents through family change. We offer a range of Services which include:

- Group work for children - four one hour sessions - and a meeting with parents before and at the end of the programme
- Group work for parents "Moving on". This is designed to give practical down-to earth suggestions to parents as they manage change in their family circumstances
- TA/Teacher training which gives staff the opportunity to learn how to offer an initial supportive response to children and their families. We aim to offer an understanding of the stages of loss as they occur during family change, to acknowledge children's feelings and offer strategies to help them "move on". We provide an opportunity for staff to look at helpful resources/books and to talk to the counsellors informally about their work in schools.

We are happy to help staff, following the training, to set up a lunch time/after school group for children who need a supportive adult at school.

For more details contact the service on 01223 576308.

> Families Information Service

Under the Childcare Act 2006 the County Council has to set up a Families Information Service (FIS). We must provide comprehensive information on services which parents might need to support their children through to their 20th birthday. This information covers not just services provided by the County Council but also Health, District Councils, the Voluntary and Private Sectors, Government Departments – everybody.

We'll be providing our FIS using five strands.

Website The County Council website already contained a great deal of relevant information but we've brought this together in one place and added more. You can check out the website at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/Fis. Suggestions for other material which could usefully be included will be very much welcomed.

Booklet The Directory of Services for Children and Families is a written guide providing basic information about services and contact details for finding out more. It has recently been out for consultation with parents and carers; they generally found it helpful but made several suggestions for improving the content and presentation which were incorporated into the final draft. This is now with the designers and printed copies should be available by early March. The final draft is accessible on the FIS website under Publications.

Telephone Our Contact Centre, Cambridgeshire Direct, is providing a full phone-based family information service. This started on 18 December and has a dedicated phone number (0345 045 1360).

Information Kiosks Touch-screen kiosks have been installed, on a pilot basis, at ten of our Children's Centres. The main links will be to our own website but also a variety of national sites.

Professionals The most important source of information for many parents and carers will be the professionals with whom they are in contact – not just County Council staff but workers from Health, the Districts, the voluntary sector and, of course, schools. We'll be sending schools stocks of leaflets, booklets and other material which we hope you will be able to share with parents and carers who you think would find access to the FIS helpful.

The FIS will be formally launched to the public during March.

Further information
please contact Paul Ainsworth on 01223 718141 or email paul.ainsworth@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Partnership at Swavesey

Many a school prospectus claims a 'partnership between school and home' in the education of their pupils, but for many parents this is not the reality. This is what **Swavesey Village College** discovered when it surveyed its parents a few years ago and Assistant Principal, **Eric Fidler**, takes up the story.

Parents told us that communication was poor compared with what they had previously enjoyed with the primary school. After the initial flurry of communication on transfer, they soon felt marginalised; relegated as spectators to what was happening to their child in school. Beyond the once a year 'Parents' Evening' there was little communication or consultation.

Often parents were reticent to 'bother' the school because they felt that it was such a big organisation which could not really be expected to know every child. This perception was often confirmed by attempts to contact staff – via the maze of telephone options which too often resulted in unanswered messages.

Whilst these were perhaps the more extreme views of some of our parents, it was clear that the 'partnership' of which we boasted wasn't there.

Primarily parents wanted to know that somebody within the school genuinely knew their child. This coincided with us looking at ways to ensure that we genuinely know, value and support every child – one of our 100% targets!

In 2005 we therefore decided to radically change the organisation of the school – this included restructuring teams from the year based system to a vertical tutor group system within a curriculum based House system.

This has positively transformed many aspects of school life, including our relationship with parents:

- We have significantly reduced the ratio of tutor to student in form groups from 1:20, with only 4/5 students from any year group. This in turn reduced the ratio between the tutor and parent/guardian at critical points in the annual cycle of events within any year group e.g.
- At induction, each tutor meets personally with the parents of the 4/5 year 7 students in their form to establish a personal relationship and shares their contact details including email.
- In year 11, tutors need to work closely with just 4/5 students and parents to ensure they are on track to achieve their Minimum Target Grades and can personalise their support accordiningly.
- We have a commitment to a minimum of one personal contact between the tutor and parents – following the termly assessment - but in practice there are more regular email communications.
- All siblings are in the same House. This promotes care and knowledge of families with the bonus to the parent that they make contact with one House leader.
- Each House has a 'Student Support Assistant' who is always available to students and parents in the relevant House office, contactable directly by phone of email. This has proven to be a very positive investment for both teachers – both as tutors and teachers.
- The majority of parent events, e.g Information Evenings, are organised in House groups, so there are only ever 45 parents in any of the sessions, creating a more informal environment. This promotes a small school feel within a school of 1200.
- The importance of the role of the tutor is reflected in the college's performance management process with teaching staff having an extra target around their role as tutor – usually linked to the individual achievement of students within their forms.

The framework of regular parental contact is underpinned by a 98% parental subscription to the email based 'Parentmail', a regular on line newsletter and an interactive website.

Recent sampling surveys indicate that parents feel much better informed and included in the life of the school. Perhaps SVC can now claim that we not only focus on the individual student but that philosophy embraces their parents too. In 2008 Parent Survey, 86% of parents agreed 'The vertical tutor group structure enhances the support my child receives in school.'

Interestingly enough, one parent, who had seen others children through the school, commented how much she liked it that we now had tutors! Whilst the old system 'wasn't broke', it certainly was not providing the minimum guarantees that we needed to provide to parents. However, we are not complacent and we routinely conduct focused questionnaires to parents using our on-line parent questionnaire, which is conducted following key events across the school eg ranging from year 7 induction to year 11 revision sessions.

Parent **Governors**

Three **Parent Governors** from Hinchingbrooke School, Huntingdon explain what attracted them to the role:

Annette Balthazor

I have only just become a parent governor. Previously I was involved in the play groups my children attended and did as much as I could for the primary school.

As a parent I strongly believe in the importance of giving our children the support and encouragement they need. Even if sometimes we don't understand the homework, just knowing you care is often enough.

I also feel the support you give the school your children attend is just as important. Since my eldest son has moved up to secondary school I've seen him flourish. I have been so proud of the achievements he has made. However, I also recognise the contribution made by the teachers to ensure he works to the best of his ability.

This was one of the reasons why I became a parent governor. I felt it was my way of giving back to the school.

I am really looking forward to the challenges of being a parent governor. If as parent governors we can play a small part in helping both students and the school move forward in a positive way, that surely must be a good thing.

Ann Bunting

As a mum, with three children at Hinchingbrooke school, my route to becoming a parent governor was through my involvement with the Parent Action Group for the Able, Gifted and Talented Scheme. It seemed logical to further support this work as a Governor and I joined the governing body in October 2005.

Although the role is daunting, the support and training offered and delivered by Governor Services has been excellent. I would encourage other governors to use the courses on offer to increase their knowledge and skills.

It is perhaps true to say that, like many volunteering roles, the greater the involvement, the greater the reward. The hope is that as a parent you have made a difference, however small, to the quality of education on offer.

Caroline Sheffield

I have been a parent governor for ten years, in an infant, a junior and now in a secondary school. I am convinced that the support and involvement of parents is vital to the success of state education. We all know that children do better at school with the support and encouragement of their parents and carers. Many parents go further and use their own skills and interests to provide vital support to their children's school in many ways such as joining the PTA, attending fundraising events, sports coaching, running after school clubs, providing careers advice and mentoring.

I have found that one of the best ways I can support the schools my children have attended is by being a parent governor and taking an active part in the strategic management of the school.

We see a lot of negative images of schools and young people in the media. In reality, when you get involved in your child's schools you discover inspirational Headteachers and school leaders, dedicated teachers and staff, committed parents and impressive, ambitious students. It is a privilege to be in a position to challenge the stereotyped media views and advance a positive picture of school life and young people whenever I can.

Getting **connected** in **Godmanchester**

Godmanchester Primary School achieved an "outstanding" for connecting with parents from a recent OfSTED inspection. The editor visited the school to find out more from Headteacher **Phil Ellington**, and especially about the use of innovative new technology.

Phil firstly described for me the *"Home Connect"* system which the school employs. This provides both Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Maths courses on-line. Both systems enable parents to share in their child's educational experience by viewing their progress from home by logging onto a website.

The Reader programme sets the child a quiz test after they finish each book. Parents can then see what the child has been reading and what is in their "bookcase". The system can send an email or text message to the parents or relations telling them when the pupil has passed a test. At Godmanchester, boys are bucking the national trend by reading as well as girls and Phil puts a large part of this down to the programme, that builds on the strong teaching of reading in Reception and Y1.

The Maths system is used to set homework in KS2 which the student completes on line via "*Home Connect*". Parents can log in to see how well their children manage each assignment and their overall progress within the marking period. Teachers use the system to set weekly objectives for the children which support the teaching for that week. Each child receives an individualised piece of work, which is appropriate to their level of attainment. Parents can, if they wish, look over their child's shoulder whilst they complete the task and lend them support as further work in the classroom confirms security of the objective or reveals where intervention is required.

Students also use the mental Mathletics programme at home and this too allows parents to take an active role in their child's maths progress.

The school is currently looking into taking all this a stage further by helping parents understand better how their children are learning maths – given that things are very different now than in their own school days. A web based programme is being developed, primarily by Adrian Tester who has an ICT role at the school. Adrian is working on power point presentations which demonstrate each of the four basic maths operations; files will be shared through Parent Mail and the school website.

Year 6 pupils will be very much involved in this exercise by being asked to write the presentation for Addition. The programme will hopefully be launched later this year, with students helping parents to learn the methodology of maths.

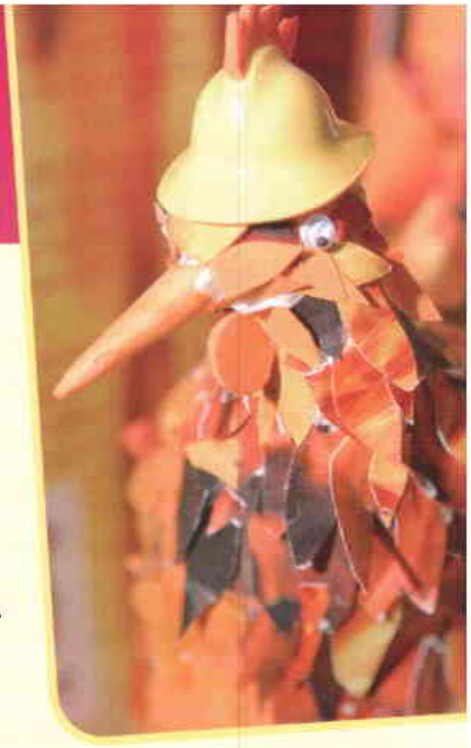
Talking of Parent Mail, the school has been an enthusiastic adopter of this system, which the PTA has paid for. 75% of parents have easy access to the internet and sending messages this way has proved popular with them as well as easing the school's admin burden. It is particularly useful when urgent messages and reminders need to be sent. Mail can also be sent selectively e.g. to particular year groups, classes or target audiences.

All this high-tech activity takes place within a friendly, people-oriented environment and is used very much to supplement, not replace, person-to-person teaching and interaction.

The feedback from parents has been very positive and they clearly appreciate the school's efforts to help them become more engaged with their children's education.

GOVERNOR TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

The Governor Advisory Group has requested that training is made available for governors, on a cluster basis. Further information about this is provided in the Governor Training and Development Programme page 73 or by accessing the Education Portal **www.ccceducation.net** and searching by Resource ID 3148.



Doing the funky chicken at King's Hedges

The annual art exhibition has become a highlight of the year at **Kings Hedges Primary School** Cambridge. Held in October, each exhibition follows a theme which has included Stop All the Clocks, Mass-Produced Monarchy, Holes and (last year) Collections, (from buried teasure to funky chickens!).

Headteacher **Jo Angel** explained that the project started nine years ago. At the time the school didn't enjoy the best of reputations locally and something was needed which would demonstrate to parents and the local community that the children were producing work of real quality. Art is a perfect vehicle for this, especially in a school where 54% of pupils have an SEN statement. Jo sees art as a "great leveller" – something which everyone can have a go at, often with rewarding results. (The school holds an Arts Council Gold Artsmark in recognition of its commitment to raising the profile of the arts).

The exhibitions start with a special opening at which the school choir perform songs related to the theme. It's then open for parents to visit, which they certainly do – comments last time included "Brilliant, Loved the funky chickens. Loved it all", "Stunning – Can't wait to see next years" and "Keep up the good work".

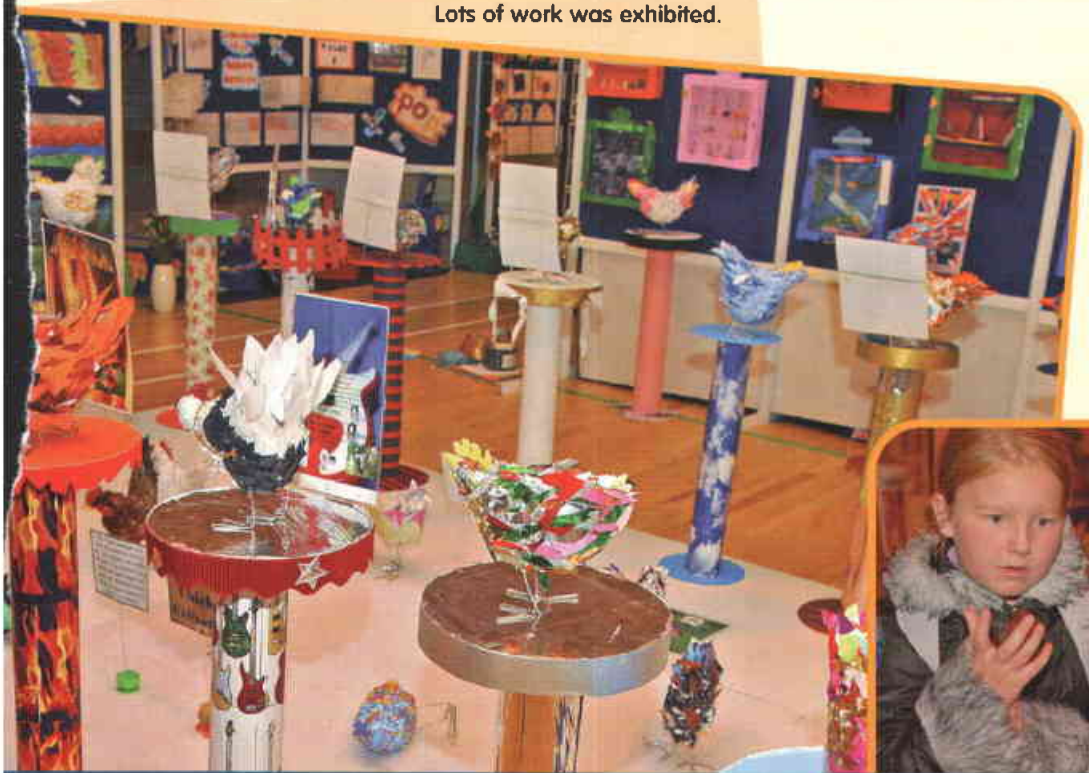
Visitors also include pupils and staff from other schools. Last year's exhibition was actually opened by the headteacher of Manor Community College, for which Kings Hedges is a feeder. The children act as exhibition guides, answering questions and enjoining not to touch!

After the exhibition, material is displayed in the corridors before eventually going home.

Jo sees a host of advantages flowing from the exhibitions. It's great for the morale of the children themselves, many of whom can't believe their work looks as good as it does once displayed. For staff it's an effective team-building exercise. It gets parents into the school and helps them realise that art forms a valuable part of the curriculum. Most of all, it's a lot of fun.

Planning is already under way for the 2009 exhibition which will celebrate drawing, a somewhat neglected skill in Jo's view.

Lots of work was exhibited.



Cambridge Family Learning

Cambridgeshire Family Learning sits within Adult and Community Learning Service and provides a range of programmes to encourage family members to learn together. Parents who engage with learning are good role models for their children and are more likely to be able to support their children effectively. This approach has been shown to be both educational and to raise children's achievement.

There are two distinct strands:

Wider Family Learning (WFL) programmes aim to develop the skills and knowledge in a specific subject area of both adult and child participants to help parents/carers to be more active in supporting their children's learning and development and to understand the impact of that support.

The brief for **Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy (FLLN)** programmes is the same as for WFL but it aims specifically to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of participants and is designed to address these literacy and numeracy needs of parents/carers.

In Cambridgeshire we work in areas of identified need in close partnership with many other services including schools, children's centres, libraries, museums and voluntary and community organisations.

In schools where family learning is offered as a rolling programme close relationships have been developed with staff and governors. Here family learning becomes embedded in the school's offer to parents and is at its most successful.

Thongsley Fields Primary School is such an example and over the past 4 years the school has continually increased its Family Learning offer, responding to the needs of the community. Courses offered range from healthy eating programmes such as *Ready Steady Lunch* and *Pack It* to Family Literacy and Numeracy courses, which involve parents coming into school and working with a tutor to improve their own skills then joining their children to work on a related topic. Adults are offered and often do take the chance to do qualifications. A new development is a science-based course with embedded literacy and numeracy. The family groups explore topics from re-cycling, conservation and environmental issues to scientific concepts. They do experiments that make these ideas relevant and show that science can be fun.

Tutors, Ruth Mitchell and Margaret Fox find that the 'hands-on' approach to learning engages and motivates whole families. A simple idea introduced in class often inspires parents to develop the idea further at home and they are often amazed by the enthusiasm of both parents and children.

What the learners say:

"You learn alongside your children, so we learn together".

Tracey, would like to train to be a crèche worker.

"Without Family Learning I would not be studying with the Open Uni, as I found out all about funding for courses".

Lorraine, recently enrolled on Environmental Studies course with the Open University. Wants to be a research technician.

"The numeracy course has really helped me understand how Sophie is learning her maths, how I can help her and we don't get crossed wires as I was taught a totally different way. We enjoy doing the Maths together".

Esme, has become a parent governor at the school and wants to train tobe an accountant. Is hoping to do voluntary work as a bookkeeper in a local VCS organisation.

The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) provides the core funding for Family Learning. Cambridgeshire has recently been successful in attracting an extra £90,000 of funding which has been provided jointly by the LSC and the DCSF to further develop their programmes. This is an indication of the value that is placed by government on this kind of learning. Research proves that Family Learning engages proven benefits for both adults and children alike.

"It is understood that family learning can sustain and support the well-being of families. Many believe that it can also bring about transformation in the lives of individuals, in the economic and social vitality of family units and in wider society".

(Family Learning - Building all our futures,
Margaret Lochrie NIACE publication, Dec 2004)

Your school could be eligible for Family Learning programmes. There are a variety of courses on offer. Courses are free to the participants and there is additional funding to provide crèche facilities. Local Development Workers are on hand to help you.

info

Further information

please contact: Flora Sheringham – **01480 810020**
or Ashley Whitehouse – **01223 712037**

Parents flock to **Learning Saturday**

A continual challenge for schools is to engage with whole families, especially dads. **Queen Edith Community Primary School**, Cambridge has been tackling this through Learning Saturdays. The third of these events, Play on Words, took place last March.

Before the event, parents and carers received lots of information encouraging them to attend and to apply for (free) tickets for those activities which needed to be pre-booked. Childrens (and parents!) were invited to come dressed as their favourite book character.

The day was opened by **Brian Moses**, the performance poet, who then led poetry workshops before rounding off the day with another poetry extravaganza. A theatre company staged two shows and there was also a performance of Tales from Tibet with puppets and music. Other events included:

- **story telling in a range of languages**
- **singing and drama in German**
- **drama workshops**
- **a talk by Marilyn Brocklehurst of Norfolk Children's Book Centre on helping children find and buy books which interest them**
- **a book café.**

Throughout the day, staff ran a variety of other activities such as making bookmarks, finger puppets, simple book making, book illustrating and access to author's websites.

An added bonus was the appearance at the school the following Wednesday of the Children's Laureate, **Michael Rosen**. He proved to be an amazing performer, holding children of all ages spellbound with his tales of life in the Rosen family.

Headteacher **Caroline Peet** was delighted with the event, especially having so many parents in school enjoying a range of activities. Attendance was excellent, with all the bookable performances "**sold out**" and with particularly good representation from the many non-English parents whose children attend the school.

Funding for the day was assisted by an Extended Schools grant and a generous donation from Cambridge University press, who also supplied volunteers from their community outreach project.

Finally, some comments from the children themselves:

"I loved helping my mummy tell the story of Billy Goat Gruff in Arabic" – **Nada**

"I liked when Brian Moses made up a poem out of my name" – **Nikolina**

"I liked the bookmarks because you could be creative and imaginative" – **Abi**

"He (Michael Rosen) explained about how you can make a poem. First it needs some rhythms to it and so you can make up some words to go with it like "No one would be able to catch me because I'm a super-flying baby" – **Benjamin**

New projects in a Rural Cluster

Bottisham, Burwell and **Soham** is a rural extended school cluster. It includes two village colleges – Bottisham and Soham - and sixteen primary schools. The cluster, which has the same boundaries as the Bottisham, Burwell and Soham (BBS) Locality, has appointed an Extended Schools Coordinator (Jill Doak) and a Varied Menu of Activities Coordinator. These coordinators are line-managed by the BBS Locality Manager, who reports to an extended schools steering group of heads and governors from the cluster area.

NEW PROJECTS IN A RURAL CLUSTER

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Jill describes three projects currently being taken forward in the area.

BOTTISHAM VILLAGE COLLEGE: 'THE ZONE'

This project provides 'a safe place to be' for College students at the end of the school day, two days a week. It is managed by the school, in partnership with the Youth Service.

Establishing The Zone was seen as a priority because, as a rural secondary school to which most students travel by school bus, a safe place to be was needed between school activities finishing and travel home. The school consulted parents and students to identify the need before establishing the provision.

The Zone runs along the lines of a Youth Café. Set-up funding was provided from a Sure Start grant and the school budget. As the first secondary school in the County to apply for a Sure Start grant, there were issues around good practice in childcare, which are non-negotiable for younger children, but which are less clear for older children. This caused some initial problems around staffing levels. The original plan was to charge a daily fee to attend The Zone – along the lines of childcare in primary schools – but this was unworkable. Staffing issues were addressed by the Youth Worker working in The Zone alongside the school's own staff member.

Following the launch in September 2007, initial take-up was poor. A small action group of students was, therefore, set up to market The Zone to other students, and it was re-launched after October half-term. The service is now free to students, but income is generated from the sale of drinks and snacks. The Zone is attracting around twenty young people to each session, and the school hopes to increase the number of sessions from two to four a week in the future.

FEN DITTON PRIMARY SCHOOL: BREAKFAST CLUB

A breakfast club, running for an hour every morning before school, has been set up at Fen Ditton Primary School specifically for children who need such provision for social reasons. The club also caters for children of working parents.

The club is managed by the school, and supported by the County's childcare and playwork advisers and myself.

The need for such provision was identified by the head teacher, staff and governors, and centred on children's readiness to learn when they came to school. For children arriving at school late or without eating, the breakfast club ensures that they start the school day calm and fed. There is also a focus on improving attendance and social skills and encouraging healthy eating. The provision ties in with the main themes and key priorities of the school's development plan. The school's Education Welfare Officer has already indicated that the breakfast club is having a beneficial impact on attendance.

Start-up funding for the club came from a Sure Start grant. Ongoing funding comes from fees from working parents and the cluster's own social inclusion fund with some places subsidised through the school's own personalised learning budget for families on income support. To aid inclusion, there is a sliding scale of charges: £2.50 for working families; 50p for families receiving income support; and free for families meeting certain criteria.

FAMILY SUPPORT : EAST CAMBS FAMILY PROJECT

This project aims to offer support to the most vulnerable children and families, in a non-threatening way that is acceptable to individuals who may be suspicious or resistant to receiving such support.

The BBS Locality Team, the cluster schools and the East Cambs Family Project (ECFP) are the key partners. ECFP is a voluntary organisation, managed by a committee. Parents are referred to ECFP, via the Locality Manager, most commonly by schools or through contact with the health service. The service is free, and the ECFP project workers travel to the families, rather than expecting the families to travel to them. ECFP is a needs-led project which is flexible and accommodating in its approach.

Funding for the project comes from the locality budget and the cluster, and is tied to clear objectives, using a joint service level agreement between the cluster, the locality and ECFP. I have also supported ECFP to secure other sources of funding, and there is close working with the Children's Centres in the locality.

One head teacher has already commented that: 'ECFP has made a really positive contribution to supporting some of our most vulnerable families. I can't imagine life without them now.'

Further information

If you have any queries or require further information on the projects contained in this article, please contact: Jill Doak, Extended Schools Co-ordinator Email: Jill.Doak@cambridgeshire.gov.uk Phone: 01638 61303 ext 5

Forward with Forum and Fusion

When Linda Rose took up her first headship last September at Great Staughton Primary School, she identified an early priority as being to build on existing good relationships between the school and parents. The Editor met her to find out how she is going about doing this.

Linda first gave me a rundown on the Class Support Meetings (CSMs) which began this term for each of the school's five classes. Early in the term the class teacher, along with the Parent Governor linked to the class, will meet parents to give them information about what will be happening for their children over the rest of the term. Previously the school had relied mainly on its newsletter and curriculum information leaflets; these are useful and will continue but the written word can only go so far and can sometimes be misinterpreted. The CSMs allow parents to ask questions, offer views and seek clarifications.

The first round of CSMs was well attended with lots of positive feedback. One suggestion was to set dates for future meetings well in advance so the summer term dates have already been notified to parents.

The next step which Linda wants to take is to set up a Parent Forum. The aim will be to harness the commitment and energy which many parents have to offer so that they can contribute to the progress of the school. Linda will test the idea out at a forthcoming parents' consultation evening. If sufficient people express an interest in taking part then the five Parent Governors will take the lead in establishing the Forum and recruiting members. Linda is clear that the Forum needs to avoid being a talking shop but operate more as a "working party" tackling specific issues and suggesting practical improvements. Linda has already spoken to the Parent Governors who are enthusiastic about the proposal, seeing it as an effective way of enabling parents to work collaboratively with the school.

A third intended development is to begin offering parenting skills training from September. The Fusion course developed by the Innovation Unit is likely to be chosen for this; it uses a peer-to-peer approach which will enable parents to acquire the skills then cascade them to other parents (some of whom may feel more comfortable receiving information and advice from fellow parents rather than from "professionals").

The school has also recently adopted the Parent Mail system and is finding it beneficial both in improving the quality and speed of information flow to parents and on cutting down the administrative workload.

Linda is keen to stress that all these developments won't be at the expense of tried and trusted existing methods of parental engagement. In particular there is no substitute for being able to talk to parents personally on a regular basis. Linda, for instance, always makes sure she is in the playground every morning as children come into school and many parents use this as an opportunity to raise issues with her.

My impression of Great Staughton was of a school truly embedded in its community and with bags of potential to get local parents even more involved – and that this will happen in a big way over the next few years.

Involving **Gypsy**, **Roma** and **Traveller Parents**

Cambridgeshire has always had one of the country's biggest population of **Gypsy**, **Roma** and **Traveller (GRT)** people. Schools have found different ways to work effectively in partnership with the parents and the experiences of two of them form this article. Firstly, **Susan Dowling**, Headteacher of Kingsfield Primary School, reports on their involvement in the National Strategies Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Programme.

Working with parents was one of the key aspects of our work within the project. We decided that talking to parents to find out what they wanted from the school was a priority and so arranged one to one meetings to find out their views. The parents identified the following as priorities:

- we should be available to parents whenever they wanted to see us
- most parents preferred direct contact with the headteacher
- they definitely didn't want us to treat their children differently from any others in the school
- any support for their children should be in the context of a targeted child in a small group from the class, unless it was part of class routine for a child to have one to one support e.g. 5 minute boxes.

To support parental involvement in their children's education we ensure that we communicate events/consultation meetings to parents orally as well as in writing. At the beginning of the project some parents were reluctant to come in to school and so we:

- arranged for teachers to meet with parents whenever they came into school
- use the Parent Liaison officer to let parents know when events are and then remind them on day
- encourage the children to remind parents about events in school
- ensure we are positive with our communications with GRT families and take an active role in making the communication happen
- ensure we celebrate success with the parents
- ensure we have flexibility when inducting new children and families into the school (part time timetables gradually building to full time in consultation with parents has sometimes been very effective in integrating some of our harder to reach families).

We have gradually moved from little or no contact with some of our Gypsy, Roma, Traveller parents to the point where:

- parents attend Parents' evenings voluntarily
- parents call in to tell the teacher why the children are absent
- some of the children attend school when siblings are ill or not attending for any reason
- parents come in to discuss any difficulties/anxieties we or they are having
- parents regularly attend assemblies, concerts and other school events.

Throughout the project, we have worked hard to promote a positive image of our Traveller pupils and to value their culture. This has included:

- displays – our families have been delighted to loan us artefacts
- traveller stories/books in the library and on display
- a Traveller Writer/Storyteller and Artist working with the children
- children talking about their experiences
- involvement in the 'Feast of Fenland Project', promotion of "working on the land" - parents sent in photographs showing families working on land from past and present.

Involvement in this project has been a very positive experience for Kingsfield and for our pupils. There have been a number of very positive outcomes for our school and the children including:

- improved attendance for many of our Traveller pupils
- parental Involvement improving with some parents coming into class regularly
- children are now attending after school activities
- children are now allowed to go on trips
- improved communication with Traveller parents and hard work to ensure that they have full access to school information
- parents asking for our support with the wider family
- we support older siblings, for example with developing ICT skills or Driving Theory
- we have appointed an older sibling of one of our pupils as a lunchtime supervisor
- good progress shown for pupils at the end of KS2.

Most importantly, we feel we now have positive relationships with Traveller families in our community and that they trust us with the care of their children.

Secondly, Jane Taylor of Shirley Community Nursery and Primary School, tells how they involve parents from their large, fluctuating Gypsy Roma Traveller population.

Our approach ranges from simply making sure we meet and greet parents in the morning to targeting them specifically for a transition project aimed at improving transfer from primary to secondary.

We have celebrated Gypsy Roma History Month, subscribed to the Traveller Times Magazine (giving all parents access), enjoyed a Traveller Story Teller, celebrated the children's achievement in assemblies and provided distance learning packs from nursery to year 6. School clubs are popular with our Traveller pupils with pupil uptake reflecting their ratio in school. Street dance has been successful and we have a regular uptake for our After School Club. Our parents have been particularly supportive by enabling their children to stay for Study Support Club and our booster classes for Year 6 literacy, maths and science.

We are currently developing displays in school to celebrate the heritage of our families and have written to all Traveller parents and children to ask for their help. Parents have replied by sharing books, photographs and information about their customs, language, superstitions and memories of the past. One child has taken a camera home to photograph her chalet and trailer. We are including story books available throughout school containing Traveller content and quotes from the children about travelling. Through asking for help another parent has volunteered to bring a wagon into school for a day during the next Gypsy Roma History Month. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether to directly approach parents and to single out just Travellers, but our experiences have been positive and parents appreciate our efforts to support and value their children.

Transfer is a common area of concern for our families and we are working to improve and support the success of our children's transfer. We are taking part in a project with other local schools and the Traveller Education Team, particularly our feeder secondary schools. We have invited parents to a coffee morning to talk about transition with the head of our local secondary school, visited our local site, and encouraged parents to complete application forms. Working with one of our feeder schools the Traveller children are visiting monthly for cooking, craft and trampoline lessons. It is planned to invite parents for the final session and we hope that the children's enjoyable experiences and enthusiasm will feed back to the parents in a positive way.

We are developing our website to share news and events of our school life and to involve the parents. We are also inviting all parents into school for a regularly weekly session to share books and stories in class with their children. Traveller parents have enjoyed coming into class in a relaxed environment while the children share albums, pop up books, traditional tales and non fiction books all at once!

Our Traveller population add diversity and sometimes bring particular challenges and are a valued and integral part of our school community. Involving them in their children's education has increased our community cohesion and benefited all involved.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. I am employed to work at my child's school. Can I stand in the parent governor elections?

Yes, but only if you work for less than 500 hours per year at the school. If you work more than that you can only stand in the staff category.

2. As a governor can the school automatically allocate my child a place?

No, the Admissions Code of Practice is very clear that preferential treatment cannot be given to the children of staff or governors. If the school has more applicants than places, the school's published oversubscription criteria has to be applied fairly and places allocated accordingly.

3. I am a parent governor and I find it very difficult to know where one role starts and the other ends?

This is a concern that bothers many parent governors. You are acting as a parent when it is about your child, for example checking their progress or an issue about their behaviour. As a governor you would be concerned with similar subjects but how they affect all children. Therefore, you would look at children's progress but it would be focusing on year groups and as a governor would not be given information on individual children. Issues which governors might discuss would be:

- Whether the children were making expected progress
- Unanticipated factors affecting progress
- Additional strategies that may be required

Similarly as a governor you would be involved in reviewing the Behaviour Policy and how it worked in school:

- Is it clear for staff and children to use?
- Does it fit with the school's aims and ethos?
- Does it promote good behaviour?

Parent governors can make governing bodies aware of issues and implications for local families that may have been overlooked or not considered. Being clear about whether your involvement is as a parent or a governor is vital. **One quick rule of thumb is to ask yourself the following: if it is about my child, then I have my parent's hat on. Whereas, if it is something that affects all children, policies and procedures, then I am carrying out my governor's role.**

4. My school wants governors to be linked to classes. It is a small school and I have three children attending. I am unsure which class to choose.

As a parent when you go into school to carry out your governor duties whether or not to go into your child's class or choose another needs to be considered. In general we would advise you not to choose your child's class. The reason for this is that as a governor you are there for the whole school community and by not having your child present it could make it easier for you. However, there are always exceptions to this general rule. The other point we would make is to rethink the link of governor to a class. As the governing body has a statutory duty to promote standards and pupil welfare, it may be good practice to link governors to a priority in the school development plan. This would give governors a clear focus of what they are expected to do on their visit and get them actively involved in monitoring agreed areas for improvement. It is expected that the new OFSTED inspection framework will put a greater emphasis on governing bodies actively supporting school improvement so your school could be ahead of the game.

5. I am only a parent and I have been asked to serve on the curriculum committee. Surely that's best left to the professionals?

Firstly and very importantly, you are not *only* a parent. All governors bring a wide breadth of experience that children benefit from. You will bring your life experiences, skills and knowledge of the local community. Moreover, you will have experienced the education system and you currently have a child at the school. This means you have valuable perspectives that the governing body will benefit from. On the curriculum committee you can ensure that what is taught is broad and balanced, meets your school aims and promotes the development of agreed values. You are not expected to know the answers but you are there to ask questions and ask for evidence. For example:

- How will our children benefit from this?
- How will you know?
- How does this fit in with our school aims?
- How will this improve children's learning?
- How will this meet the Every Child Matters outcomes?

The other key point to remember is that you are not there as an individual but as part of a team. Collectively you will be well equipped to provide effective challenge and support to your school.

6. Another parent has approached me and wants me to sort out a problem. They said their child is being bullied. The details were really upsetting. What do I do?

Firstly, it is not unusual to be asked to resolve a concern for someone. Hearing about a child being bullied is upsetting. The thing to remember is that you cannot as a governor deal with this. You need to encourage the parent to make the school aware that the bullying is happening. You should make the parent aware of the school's procedures and say that they can only start to deal with issues when the school has been informed. The governing body reviews its Anti-bullying Policy periodically and you might want to ask how effective the policy has been at monitoring and dealing with incidents.

7. Our school is reviewing the school uniform. Parents have approached me in the playground to say they want a particular option. They said as they had all voted for me they expected me to vote for their preference at the meeting. Do I have to?

As a parent governor you want to listen to the views of parents and relay them to the rest of the governing body. So it would be useful for you to outline parental comments when the uniform was being discussed. However, you are a representative parent and not a delegate. This means you are not mandated by your electorate, but you state your own opinions and vote as your conscience dictates.

Nursery makes its Mark

Huntingdon Nursery School has successfully completed the Early Years Mark in ICT. This has replaced the NAACE mark in early years settings and is more appropriate for young children as it looks at the whole learning environment including how ICT supports learning through play.

The assessment took place last November by a BECTA assessor who held a range of interviews with staff, governors and parents. The purpose of their visit was to verify the documentation that had been brought together to evidence the use of ICT across all aspects of Nursery work. The assessor took time to talk to children in the Nursery and finally fed back to Tamsin Harvey, Nursery ICT co-ordinator and myself.

The assessor found quality and range of the use of ICT across all areas of learning and development to be outstanding, and the impact of this could be clearly seen in the children's confident use of ICT. The example given was children using digital cameras independently, reviewing the pictures and talking about what they were doing; they were using IWB [interactive white board] and navigating through the programmes with confidence.

Our 'Elephant Kiosk' [in reception area] gives a touch screen information point for parents, which is also linked to the Nursery website.

The assessor especially noted the use of ICT to support inclusion. We have a wide range of children with additional needs and, where possible, ICT is used to enhance learning and teaching and to enable greater access to the curriculum. We ensure that we consider the widest range of ICT we can; for instance in 2007 we bought equipment which meant one room could be used as a sensory room.

It took some time to develop ICT to meet the standard in every section of the assessment and the leadership of this work with all the staff at the Nursery was undertaken by Tamsin Harvey. We considered many times whether to buy in expert advice to support us though the process, but decided that the best way to achieve it was to work with all staff so that children, wherever they were placed in the Nursery, had the same access to adults with enhanced skills. This paid dividends as staff have worked to support each other sharing knowledge and skills and having a 'can do' attitude.

We found that children have used equipment with respect and that adults trust children to use equipment without worrying about it. We have kept play very strongly at the centre of our work and feel pleased that the Nursery has been awarded the Early Years ICT mark.

Kay Dimelow
Headteacher

Tempting them in

Like most schools, **Yaxley Infant** had problems persuading parents to attend Curriculum Workshops, with ten to fifteen attending at the most. The Editor visited Headteacher **Belinda Ourtilbour** to find out how they successfully moved away from the "same old, same old".

Belinda explained that the strategy involved both timing and content of the workshops. On the former, this meant holding them straight after school so that the children could also take part. Children being met after school can also encourage their parents to come in for the workshop if they haven't already intended doing so. Before the event, children make personal invitations to give to their parents. Where the school wants particular parents to attend an activity, their children are given key roles in the presentation as a further inducement to attend.

On content, each session starts with a presentation, largely by the children themselves, setting the context for the curriculum area concerned. Each classroom is set up with a variety of activities promoting the subject and teachers, parents and children go round them together. Tea and coffee are offered, as is a crèche for younger children. As a result, recent workshops have seen parents "crammed like sardines" into the hall.

Belinda then described for me in more detail a recent workshop on Healthy Eating. A group of teachers, parents and governors had, before the session, developed a booklet on healthy packed lunch ideas so this could be launched at the event. Belinda gave a brief introduction, then a group of Year 2s put on a performance around healthy eating using a puppet. The Healthy School Rap finished this portion.

Next a dietician put on a "Ready, Steady, Lunch Box" presentation, as part of which two teams of parents and children had to sort out a healthy packed lunch from assembled ingredients.

The Catering Service was offering taster sessions of healthy school meals and gave a talk on nutritional standards.

Lots of further activities could be found in the classrooms such as sorting food and interactive whiteboard games.

The end result was both children and parents being much more aware of what a healthy packed lunch comprises and the benefits have been seen in the subsequent lunch contents.

Other Workshops have covered Phonics, social and emotional aspects of learning and transitions/SEAL for reception parents.

The school has other ways and means to engage parents. For the last five years, Parent School Days have been held, where parents accompany their child to school and have a choice of three sessions they can attend during the day. They have generated lots of positive feedback and a good take-up rate – around 60%. Parents join in enthusiastically and many comment on how much they've learnt.

Coffee mornings for new parents in the reception class are another example. On the child's first day, parents are anyway inclined to hang around so present a captive audience. The Friends of Yaxley Infant School are on hand to chat and recruit and feedback questionnaires about the induction programme are given out. The whole message is that parental views are very much valued and that parents are the school's key partners.

At the heart of the community in Bar Hill

Back in December, the editor e-mailed all Headteachers to ask if they had found interesting and effective ways to engage with parents. **Lin Whyte**, Headteacher of **Bar Hill Community Primary School**, wrote to him about the school's Better Reading Partnership training but when he visited he soon found that this was the tip of the iceberg so far as the school's involvement of parents goes.

Lin began, as promised, by telling me about the Better Reading Partnership course which is run at the school over two days by Jane McLeod, Reading Recovery Teacher Leader and herself an ex-Bar Hill teacher. The course trains parents on how to deliver reading programmes for children who have a significant reading deficit. Each child receives intensive 20 minute one-to-one sessions three times a week. The course only started recently but 10 parents have already been trained up and several have, as a result, decided that they want to investigate teaching as a career.

Lin went on to describe some of the other ways in which the school involves parents in its work. Bar Hill started off as a Community School and the community ethos remains very strong.

Multi-agency coffee mornings take place twice term. They offer parents a chance to drop in and meet a variety of local practitioners including the Locality Team Manager, Parent Support Adviser, School Nurse, Education Welfare Officer and others. The mornings have been very successful to date, enabling parents to network with professionals who can give advice and guidance on a wide range of issues.

The school's Citizenship Group encourages children to develop skills around listening, buddying, dealing with bullying etc. Twice a term the Group runs Camill's Sunshine Café. The children provide the cakes, serve drinks, run book and toy stalls and generally take charge. Many parents attend and mingle with the staff and children. As a means of encouraging parents into the school it has proved most effective.

The school has a history of parental involvement in working groups. A recent one looked at homework and came up with a new theme-based approach called Discovery Detectives. The theme might, for instance, be ecology but will in any event be linked to a whole-school theme. Each term there is a "Big Sharing Day" when parents are invited in to see the results of the detective work.

Regular more formal consultations with parents are also held. Questionnaires go out from Governors and seek views on new ideas which have been brought into the school and so forth. Three times a year parents get a school meals questionnaire. Lin told me that response rates are very high, something commented on in the recent Ofsted report which was impressed by how complimentary parents were about the school.

Parents sometimes take the lead in getting things done, the Hammerhead Project being an example. The road leading to the school terminates in a hammerhead and some dangerous manoeuvring was taking place at busy times. Parents organised a week where they reminded other parents about the safety issues and the situation is now much improved. A parent is leading on the Safer Routes to Schools project, whilst another chairs the Eco Working Party (responsible for the display in the school hall during my visit – the sculptures were made out of supermarket trolleys which had been thrown into rivers).

Further examples which Lin mentioned to me are:

- a 1, 2, 3, Magic Parenting Course being run by Rachel Britton, the Parent Support Adviser
- various fundraising activities organised by parents
- the school's 40th birthday celebrations last October, attended by many parents who had also been pupils
- the annual Vision Evening where parents and others revisit the school's vision statements and take part in themed activities.

My visit left me with no doubt that here was a school truly at the heart of its community and one where parents are not just welcomed in but enabled to play key roles in the continuing development of the school.

"It takes a **community** to **raise a child**"

This North American Indian proverb is a favourite of **Rachel Myer**, Headteacher at **Thongsley Fields Primary** and **Nursery School, Oxmoor, Huntingdon**.

"It sums up for me how wide we have to look in order to develop a love of and value for learning within our children. It is the opposite of a world where the remit of learning sits with school alone." Rachel explains how the school has been developing a "Learning for All" culture over the past few years.

The Oxmoor Estate is amongst the most deprived wards not just in Cambridgeshire but the whole country; as a consequence 50% of our children receive free school meals and 58% have SEN Statements. On top of that, the area has an increasingly diverse population, with 26% of pupils having English as an additional language. In this context and where adult confidence is generally low, our steps have had to be small. Many parents also have negative memories of their own schooldays, leading to a reluctance to cross our threshold.

We began by taking an eraser to the edges of the school and classrooms. For three years now we have been running 'learning workshops' every term. This has been a simple, low input, high impact way of engaging parents and carers in the school lives of their children. We started by inviting parents to join their children in whatever activity was going on in the classroom for the final 45 minutes of a school day. Staff decided upon a whole school focus often related to current priorities (i.e. reading and role-play) and teachers ensured that this was taking place when the parents came in.

Most recently we have moved the workshops to the first 45 minutes of the school day, attendance has increased and the popularity has meant that KS1 are planning a follow-up session before the end of term due to popular demand and parents' enthusiasm to see how phonics is taught.

A simple feedback form is completed by parents to gauge the usefulness of the session and plan next steps. Parent voice has influenced our planning of these sessions, with maths, phonics and PE being favourite requests and the next workshops are then planned with these in mind.

As our parents' interest in their child's classroom has developed we have been able to build in new more formalised family learning opportunities. Partnership work with the Local Authority's Family Learning service, projects run through our Children's Centre and some of our 'home grown' courses now run weekly and are well attended by an increasing number of parents.

Amongst the eleven courses we're running this term are:

- **Making the Computer Work 4 U**
- **Sibling Rivalry**
- **Family Literacy**
- **Raising Children**

All courses are free and for most of them we can offer a free crèche as well.

Again the carrot for these learners has been the direct engagement of their own children with their learning. Teaching by qualified Family Learning teaching staff of parents and children together has built self-esteem and motivation of both groups of learners. A long-established group of parents have recently taken their GCSE equivalent in maths; and joke that they will graduate from us one day!

Many of the courses have been over-subscribed and feedback has been universally positive. There has also been a cultural shift with more parents regarding the school as "theirs"; this level of engagement gives us credits to draw on when the inevitable difficulties arise with individual parents because the lack of an us-and-them culture and our ability to offer practical help to parents can often help defuse situations.

Despite the now established ethos of 'Learning for All' in the school; engaging new learners in new courses remains a challenge. In order to avoid any social stigma or feelings of patronisation; promotion is couched along the lines of 'teaching is all very different now at school, come and see how it is done and how you can help your child'.

Our next big push is to try and get more fathers engaged. We've had a few dads attend parenting courses but not yet the academic courses on offer so we need to make sure there are attractive options for them in future.

However, even the glossiest flier fails to ignite interest and our most successful advertising and enticement is face to face engagement Obama- style! This coupled with an embedded culture of cross-generational learning and the power of the children thriving from their parents' involvement, our number on roll is rapidly rising and our age range has more than quadrupled!

A day in the life of a **PSA**

Parent Support Advisers (PSAs) are now well-established within the County Council's Locality Teams. They support schools and parents with issues around behaviour, attendance and pupils at risk of exclusion. Although there is no such thing as a "usual" day for a PSA, **Claire Bilton** from the Cambridge North Team has a shot at describing one.

Today I begin at 8.30am handing out flyers in the school playground and encouraging parents to attend a new group. Several parents say hello and chat to me about how things have been at home, a mum offers to help hand out the flyers and we make a fab team and are done in record time.

Next, it's over to the nearby children's centre to facilitate a coffee morning. It is only the second week and I'm happy to have six families attend. The informal session lets me get to know more local parents and understand the issues parents are facing in the area. The coffee morning was started in response to parents' requests and so, like them, I find this really encouraging. They give their feedback (mostly positive which is great) and some ideas to boost attendance. All are pleased that a group has begun near them and agree unanimously they will be coming back, especially if there are chocolate biscuits and fruit!

Before lunch I meet a child at school for a one to one session. PSA's may do this as part of a behaviour programme when working with a family. This child needs support recognising and taking responsibility for their anger, so we work on learning to recognise the feelings that come before the explosion of temper. We also talk about what the child can do if they feel angry to cool off, such as hitting a pillow, talking to someone they trust or screaming in the garden. I set a fun activity to try at home and we arrange to meet again next week.

Over lunch an overwhelmed parent calls to let me know that she has had a bad weekend with her child. I pop round for a home visit and we discuss the problems. I surprise her by pointing out the positives as the child in question is mostly playing up due to her excellent use of the behaviour strategies we discussed the week before. We discuss how the child is pushing back harder now there are unwelcome and tight boundaries and routines in place. I urge her to stick with it and to be in touch if she feels that she needs some encouragement.

Another home visit follows but the parent isn't home and so I find myself free for half an hour. I call into the nearby children's centre to pick up some leaflets on local information and to request a crèche for an upcoming parenting course I'm offering with the Red Hen, a local charity which supports home-school liaison.

Then it is the last stop of the day to co-tutor a 123 Magic Parenting Course with fellow PSA Rachel Britton. It is the last session and it's nice to hear positive feedback from parents who have tried the strategies we've suggested. Finishing the day at 4.30pm tired but happy, there is never a dull moment being a PSA and things often don't go as you expect them to but the rewards are often great and that makes it all worthwhile.

Traveller Parents, Mary Barnard, St. Marys

Traveller parents were invited to an afternoon tea drop-in where they had the opportunity to meet with and discuss relevant issues with the named traveller support teacher in the school. She was able to point out the necessity for them to understand the need for regular attendance at school and they were able to chew over concerns they had, mainly which were around secondary transfer. The majority of the families were represented and we even had one dad come and join in. They were very grateful to have this opportunity to speak openly and be listened to. They had been very pleased with the visit that Year 1 had made to the site and hoped that they would have the chance to welcome other year groups in the future.

Kelly, one of our Traveller Mum's started supporting Traveller children in school and helping out with the weekly Traveller computer club which is held in the lunch hour. She so enjoyed this that she gained the NVQ L2 TA qualification and is now a paid TA in the school supporting the Traveller children with their phonic work. We are using the funding that we receive for Traveller children to fund this. Kelly liaises between the families on site and the school and it is through her support that we have managed to get the families to allow the children to come on school trips.

Can I play the **drums mum?**

In the last issue of Learning Together, we reported on the launch of **Cambridgeshire Culture**, which featured an inspiring solo performance from **Dame Evelyn Glennie**, who also spoke about why cultural activities are so important for children and young people. Dame Evelyn has kindly followed this up by writing the following piece for us.

Firstly please let me say a big thank you to Helen Whiter and her colleagues of Cambridgeshire County Council for the opportunity to speak and perform at the Cambridgeshire Culture Launch. Not only did I enjoy speaking at the event but I also had the opportunity of watching some of the other events within the programme. I thoroughly enjoyed the art work displayed around the School and the performances both inside and outside the venue.

These events are offering the very best opportunities to youngsters to share in the arts and what struck me most was the look of pleasure on the faces of those young performers. From the visual arts to the serious drumming, the traditional and the cheeky drama excerpts they were all having a great deal of fun. I see an increased interest from young parents who want to become involved in their child's ongoing development and I am really interested when I see projects that involve parents and children taking part in cultural activities. I recognise from my own childhood the pleasure and fun I had when our family got together to create music or just to have a sing-a-long.

I know how lucky I was to have received an excellent musical education and the loving support of my family. I attended a normal Two-Teacher Country school and then a secondary Community Comprehensive School and my needs were always considered by both the school and my parents. As I travel the world I recognise the need for good education but also the need for good support. I am often involved in events similar to the Cambridgeshire Culture launch and I see good teachers hard a work offering opportunities and benefits to young people. Quite often I hear that a large amount of work is done outside the normal working hours, during the evening or at weekends. I also know many parents spend a large proportion of their time engaged in activities linked to their children's development in school. I believe there is a clear link between good parental interaction and a child's positive progress.

During the making of the film Touch the Sound web **http://www.skyline.uk.com/touchthesound/index.html** I began to realise just how much we take the creation of sound for granted. How bombarded we are every day by sounds that have no meaning and many which are unwanted or intrusive. I was told recently that we are creating hearing problems because we are turning up the volume on our i-Pods to drown out the sound of traffic, talking, shouting, trains, airplanes, car alarms etc. In other words we are deliberately isolating ourselves from others. It is clear to me we need to create a balance between private time and social time. In my experience young people find it easier to make friends whilst sharing a creative experience especially music, dancing or acting they all offer skills that cross boundaries. From an early age children are using their creative skills to grow and develop. From using a wooden spoon on an upturned saucepan to making a mud pie they are expressing their creativity.

Without a doubt we are living in interesting times and we have access to a great deal of technology. I see a worrying trend caused by some new products for a reduction in the level of good communication between parents, children and groups. For example we have i-pods to listen to music alone; we have computers and TV's in bedrooms allowing children to become isolated from the family unit. I am not against new technology I would just like to see a better balance and I can see this is happening in some areas. The Wii is a classic example where the technology has encouraged family activities.

Like many of you, I too am horrified by the amount of reported knife crime, and mourn the loss of young victims stabbed or killed violently by other youngsters. Clearly there is a need for schools and parents to take action and create opportunities for young people to come together and have fun rather than hang around on street corners.

I am also aware that schools face challenging times trying to balance subjects on the National Curriculum and it is well known that resources are limited. It is often the cultural subjects that are less well funded, which is really sad because those are the subjects that can provide cohesiveness and social awareness. Therefore it may be down to parents to add that extra value to the equation. It might be that schools need to take a lead in engaging parents and likewise for parents to find out what activities exist and help fill the gaps.

I believe parents have the power to demand and create some of the additional needs required to supplement children's social development. After school clubs offer children a better balanced 'skill set' enabling them to cross cultural divides and improve their communication skills but we cannot rely on teachers alone to provide them.

There are some incredibly successful schemes such as El systema a project that began in Venezuela **http://instrumentsofpeace.us/index.php/Used-Instruments/El-Systema-Changing-the-World-through-Music.html** web

This project involves young people, many from poorer backgrounds, who have formed an orchestra and are performing around the world. I am a firm believer that 'young hands' should not be allowed to be idle. What better than to engage them in a cultural arts activity that brings them out of the headset and into a participative scheme and where they can learn a new skill, a social skill and one that will stay with them into adulthood.

As I said at the beginning I was lucky, my school had musical instruments for those children who were keen to learn. I was given a snare drum to take home and we all know how that experience developed!

Evelyn Glennie

Partners in Learning: A key part of a successful school

For many years Buckden C of E Primary School had been successful and respected. In late 2005 its then new Headteacher, Margaret Leverett, was faced with a "satisfactory" Ofsted report, dipping results, a falling role and a declining reputation.

Part of her response was the creation of Partners in Learning (PIL). This was a group of parents and staff who met to improve communication between parents and the school to enhance the experience and learning of their children. In addition to the Headteacher and the Foundation Stage Leader, the group was made up of Governors (mainly parent Governors) and representatives from "FOBS", the school's PTA.

What have we done? We have instigated annual surveys of parents, two looking at communication and one at how children experience school. **What did we learn?** Overall, parents were positive about the school. The main concerns were about having sufficient information on how their children were doing, homework, and notice for events. The school was able to make changes in how it worked and feed back to parents what it was doing and why.

The past four years have seen a major review of the aims and values of the school, the symbols that pull everyone together, and the key policies and statements that create the sense of direction for everyone. A revamped School Prospectus, new uniforms, the development of a Parent's Council; PIL was at the heart of all of these. And it's not just the positives that PIL adds to. Sometimes schools have to make changes that are unpopular. PIL has a key role in helping to explain the rationale for these changes to parents.

What lessons did we learn? There are two main things. At first the meetings were informal, a group of allies rather than people with a shared task. What PIL does has too much significance for the school not to be focussed on doing it well. Secondly, sometimes it was hard to remember that we were there to get the views of parents rather than express our views as parents. Not the same thing at all!

The school's self evaluation framework frequently refers to PIL as a source of evidence about the link between the school and parents. I believe that this reflects that for Buckden to continue to progress back to being one of the leading schools in the county it must work with, and harness the contribution of, its parents.

In Andy Clarke, Buckden now has a new Head who is building on the progress made over the past four years. 'Partners in Learning' remains a key part of his team approach. Without the active support of Andy and the enthusiasm, skill and commitment of the parents involved, PIL would not work. With these things, we have a school with a sense of direction and improving results. As for Ofsted, something tells me we will know that in a few weeks.

Andy Jarvis – Chair of Governors

Engaging Parents – St Peter's finds the keys to success

Most of the parental engagement articles in this issue are about specific initiatives or schemes. No-one would argue that the ideal is for parents to have appropriate involvement in just about everything a school does; I visited a school which is working hard to move in that direction, St Peter's in Huntingdon.

I first met with Headteacher, **Val Ford**, and **Julia Robson**, Guild Support Manager (Tutor Groups at the school are arranged into four Guilds, each with a full-time Support Manager who is available throughout the day to support students and parents). Val and Julia took me through some of the ways and means by which the school currently engages with parents. Since 2007, for example, parent information evenings have been held at the start of each school year for all year groups and have been very well received, with attendance going up each time. Where necessary, parents are phoned in advance to encourage them to come along. Questionnaires are also given out at parents evenings and these have generated a good response and valuable feedback.

The school is about to start up a community drop-in facility so that parents can call in at any time, access the internet and other information, have a tea or coffee and talk to the staff who will be on hand.

The four Guild Support Managers are often the first point of contact for parents; because they don't carry a teaching load, they are easily accessible to parents, who feel they have someone to talk to and share issues with. Julia says that she has been able to build up a rapport and relationship with all "her" parents, even those who initially presented as difficult or challenging.

St Peter's has recently begun using the i-behave electronic behaviour management system (**www.improvebehaviour.co.uk**) which allows the school to e-mail parents regular reports on how well or not so well their children are behaving. Val stressed that the system is used as much to report on positive behaviours as on problems. This has greatly improved and speeded up two-way communications with parents

Like other schools, St Peter's has benefitted from the appointment of a Parent Support Adviser who has particularly helped on engagement with previously hard-to-reach parents.

The school has seen increasing numbers of students with English as Additional Language and they and their parents are given a lot of individual support, including special invitation evenings plus a booklet and DVD for new parents. One of the school's Teaching Assistants is herself Polish and has been able to make a real difference in engagement with parents both from the school and the feeder primary schools.

All of this is on top of the "normal" work with students which is very focussed on individuals. Parents are regularly contacted as a matter of course, receiving monitor points three times a term, plus parent information letters and a termly magazine. All year 9 students are interviewed before and after selecting options and parents can come along if they want. The school is generally very tight on standards and expectations and parents welcome such clear parameters and boundaries. In summary, Vicky sees effective parental engagements as absolutely key to the success of the school and the open, inclusive approach definitely seems to be working.

Inclusion obviously extends to all students as well so I next met up with **Mark Ford**, who has been Inclusion Manager since May. Mark works in particular with students who are at risk of exclusion and has made it a priority to engage with their parents, contacting them very regularly, including visiting them at home. He stresses to parents that it is vital for them and the school to work together so he lays on the line what the school will do and what the parents are expected to do. This straight-talking and personalised approach has clearly yielded dividends in the improved performances of the students. Mark has also arranged opportunities for parents and carers of students in the unit to get together and share experiences which has worked well.

Finally I talked to **Una Sancaster** who is Student Liaison Adviser in the Supportive Learning Team. Una is a first point of contact for many parents, who know they can phone her for help and advice. She also provides some training for parents such as the Triple P Parenting course. Una is the school's designated child protection officer so a lot of her work involves liaison with social care and other agencies where she finds her background knowledge about parents to be invaluable. She says that the key to effective rapport with parents is to be honest and upfront with them because that's what generates their respect and then their cooperation.

A couple of times when Val was telling me about the school she modestly said **"we're probably only doing what other schools do"**. This is no doubt correct to an extent but I was very much struck by the whole-hearted commitment of everyone I spoke with to making parental engagement genuine and real. St Peter's has a lot to be proud of in this area.

The Editor

Learning in a virtual world

Andy Hannaford, Manager of **ConnectEd** (part of Cambridgeshire Education Other Than at School (EOTAS)) describes how their Online Learning programme has made a huge difference to students unable to attend "real" schools.

We hear a great deal these days about e-learning, learning platforms, virtual schools, and the changing face of education for all our students. So what will virtual education look like?

Since 2003, groups of Cambridgeshire pupils have been experiencing education through a virtual environment. They have been at the cutting edge of e-learning; to them a Learning Platform is something they have been using daily for the past five years to access learning and be part of an active community. For these students the Virtual Classroom is their school and their community, their link with the outside world and their passport to learning.

ConnectEd Online Learning was established by Cambridgeshire EOTAS to support and enhance the learning of those students who were unable to access current mainstream provision. Its primary aim was to use the burgeoning internet technology to educate those pupils who were at home for whatever reason and unable to attend school. These pupils included those with medical needs, pupils needing an alternative provision and those who need a different approach to learning.

Initially the ConnectEd Learning Platform was no more than a web page for each pupil with work attached. But as technology grew so did ConnectEd. Its' Learning Platform is now highly sophisticated, allowing work to be sent out to individuals, groups or the whole online population. Students are encouraged to share ideas, views and comments via their own chat room as well as to create their own wikispaces. Soon they will be able to create their own podcast and blog areas, all from within a safe environment. For those students, many of whom are isolated because of a medical condition or geographic location, the ability to take part in an active community is of vital importance.

What makes ConnectEd a truly virtual learning environment is that students have live, teacher led lessons via our Virtual Classroom. Students for the past three years have been logging in to lessons taught in the virtual classroom. For each subject students have two 45minute lessons per week. During these lessons they take an active role, sharing ideas and views and take part in group and paired activities.

The virtual classroom is a very powerful tool. For some of our students the formal classroom had become a barrier to their learning. The virtual classroom helps break down these barriers and even the most difficult of students has found this approach to their learning engaging.

So how successful is Connected Online Learning? Well since 2004 we have supported the learning of over 280 pupils throughout Cambridgeshire. Our GCSE exam success stands at 100% with 50% of pupils achieving levels A to E in English and 66% levels A to C in Maths and Science. Nor bad for students who, until 2008, only had one 45 minute lesson per week plus support materials and the backing of a very dedicated staff. But exam success is not always all there is to our role. There was the elective mute who spoke for the first time during a virtual lesson, or the reclusive girls who would text chat away to each other, neither knowing the other but finding friendship online.

Let's leave the last word to the pupils who have already experienced a means of learning that for many of our students could be the future:

I'm really enjoying working in this way. I feel that I am in control of my own learning and that I'm really interested in what I am doing now.'

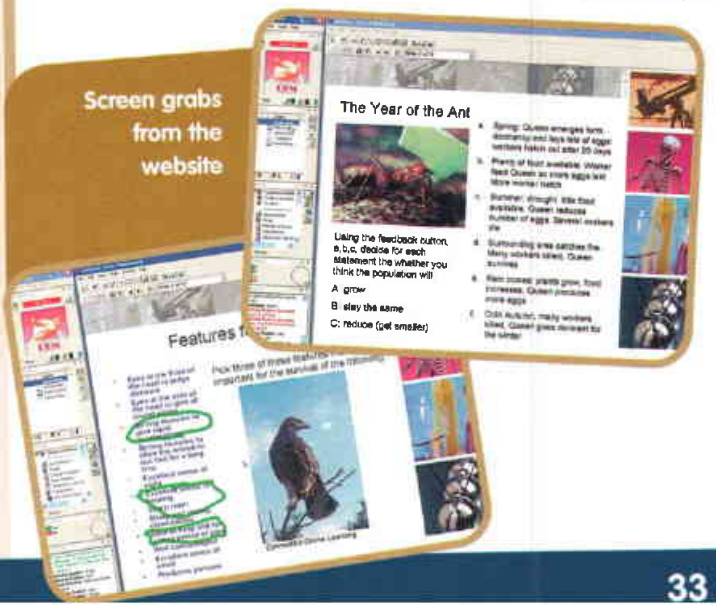
Year 9 Pupil

'I think opportunities for ConnectEd students to meet in the portal give us important human contact. This is important for those like myself who cannot get out easily.'

Year 10 Pupil

'I now know that there are others like me out there. I thought it was just me that found being in school difficult. Now I can learn in a way that I really enjoy, chat with the others and have a bit of more control over when I learn and what I do'

Year 10 Pupil



Welcome...

New Headships with Immediate Effect

Mr Tim Rogers	Priory Park Infant School
Mrs Alison Beardon	Cherry Hinton Infant School
Ms Francesca Catterson	Barrington Primary School
Mrs Jackie North	Benwick Primary School

New Headships from November 2008

Mrs Sue Raven	The Centre School

New Headships from January 2009

Ms Cindy Fiddy	Huntingdon Primary School
Mrs Rebecca Quinn	Thorndown Infant School

New Headships from April 2009

Ms Catherine Jenkinson-Dix	City of Ely Community College
Mrs Louise Clark	Linton Infant School
Mrs Gillian Owen	Park Street Primary School
Miss Maureen Strudwick	Thomas Clarkson CC

New Headships from June 2009

Mr Andrew Hall	The Harbour School

New Headships from September 2009

Mr Stephen Burton	Milton Road Primary School
Ms Sarah Humphreys	Jeavons Wood Primary School
Ms Jo Phillips	Wyton on the Hill Primary School

Retirements

Farewell to:

Dorothy Betts
Headteacher, Park Street Primary, Cambridge (who retired at Easter).

Long Service Awards Congratulations and thank you to:

25 Years Service

Mrs Sue Wallington
Reprographics Technician, Bassingbourn Village College.

Mr Bob Higgs
Site Manager, William de Yaxley Junior School.

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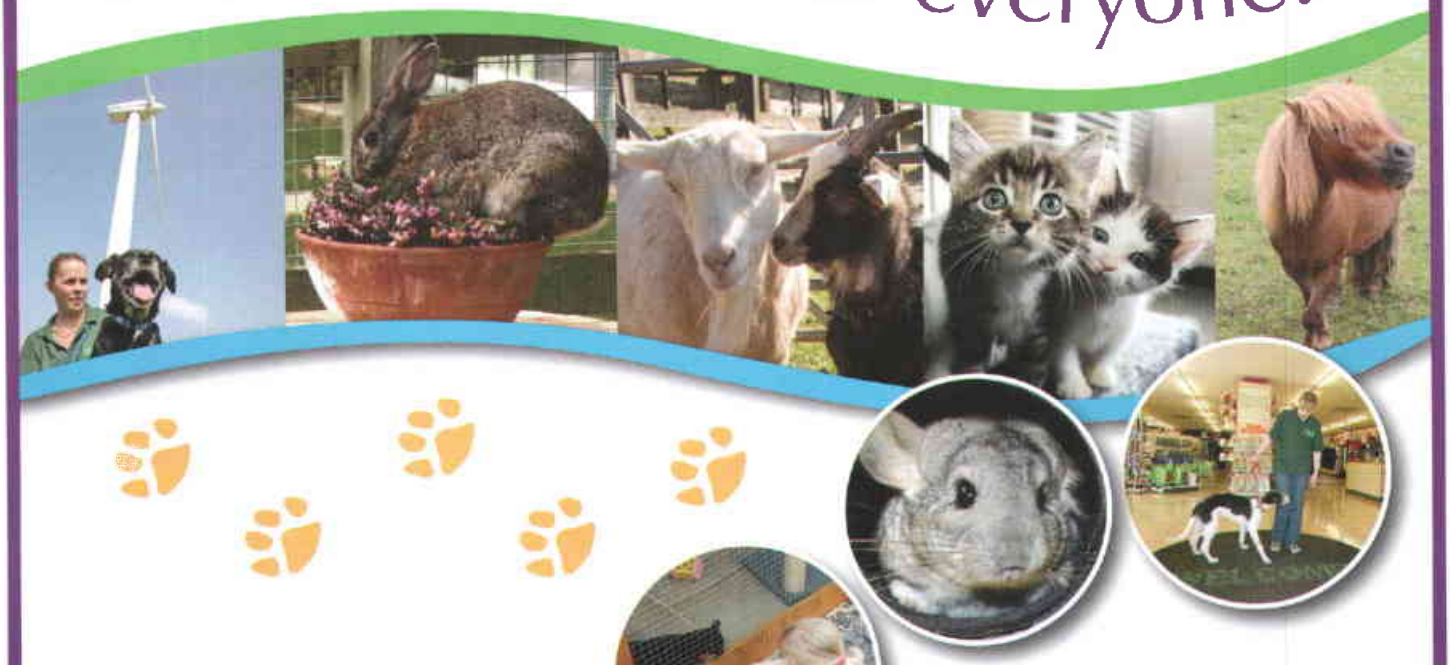
Events, food and family fun... A great day out for everyone!



- Events
- Visit the Animals
- Pet Care & Gift Shop
- Thrift Shop
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- Children's Play Area
- Picnic Area
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- Free Admission

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The Orchards, Wisbech, part of an after school club, Key Stage 2.